

The Evidence of Easter (Resurrection Sunday)

by Randall Price

All Christians are familiar with the events celebrated at Easter - the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For most, these events have been communicated through seasonal sermons, illustrated storybooks, or dramatic recreations. It may, then, be a surprise to learn that the sites associated with this greatest story ever told still exists today. The science of archaeology has been the modern means of restoring much of the first-century world and enabling us to experience the reality of Easter in a way unavailable to Christians of the past. Archaeology confirms that the life-changing message of Easter, even though miraculous in nature, took place in the arena of actual history. This is significant for Christians for two reasons.

First, because even though the message of Easter may be preached with passion from our pulpits and performed with pageantry in our Easter productions, people may mistakenly feel these are merely church “traditions” rather than historical truth. As with any truth that has become tradition it can lose the sense of its original setting in this world and feel it belongs to some other. This loss of connection with the real world context of Christianity, which defines our faith as fact, imperils our practice of the real significance of the season - our personal salvation provided at the cross and of resurrection life and the future hope of our own bodily resurrection. Archaeology has the ability to replace our unreal portraits of Jesus with a real figure from a real world that demands real faith. As archaeology uncovers the material remains of the Easter context, it does not diminish the miracle of the message but increases our faith in its historical fulfillment.

A second concern for archaeology’s importance to Easter grows out the first and relates to the problem of the present postmodern concept of Christianity as an experience transcending history. The problem of postmodern thought is revealed in a statement by Marcus Borg, Oregon State University professor and Chairman of the Jesus Seminar: “The truth of Easter does not depend on whether there really was an empty tomb ... It is because Jesus is known as a living reality that we take Easter stories seriously, not the other way around. And taking them seriously need not mean taking them literally.” To the contrary, however, archaeological excavations have given sufficient evidence that there is every reason to take the Easter stories both seriously and literally. Let us consider the two central events of the Easter accounts, the crucifixion and burial of Jesus.

With respect to the fact of crucifixion, the method of execution perfected by the Roman government to punish criminals, archaeology has vividly revealed its existence in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. In 1968 the remains of a crucified man from Giv'at ha-Mivtar, a northern suburb of Jerusalem, was discovered in an ossuary from near the time of Jesus. The name of the man, from an Aramaic inscription on the ossuary, was Yohanan ben Ha'galgol, and from an analysis of his skeletal remains he was in his thirties, approximately the same age as Jesus at the time of His crucifixion. His ankle bone was still pierced with a 7 inch-long crucifixion nail and attached to a piece of wood from a cross. Apparently the nail had hit a knot in the olive wood *patibulum* (the upright section of a cross) and become so lodged that the victim could not be removed without retaining both the nail and a fragment of the cross. According to one anthropological analyst, there were also marks of nails on the wrist bones and of a board had been used to support the feet. This find reveals afresh the horrors of the Roman punishment as recorded in the Gospels. They indicate that the position the body assumed on the cross was with the legs nailed on either side of the upright stake. Therefore, rather than the body being straight, it was pushed up and twisted, causing terribly painful muscle spasms and eventually death by the excruciating process of asphyxiation. This discovery supports the

biblical statement of nailing crucified victims, refuting a previous theory they were simply tied to the cross. In addition, the fact that the bones of Yohanan were found in secondary burial within a tomb also disproves an old hypothesis that state criminals were cast into a common grave, for this crucified victim, like Jesus, had received a proper Jewish burial in a family tomb.

The place of Jesus' crucifixion and burial has also been brought to light through archaeology. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, located today in the Christian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, encloses a portion of a hill traditionally considered to be the true site of Calvary. Protestant Christian tourists most favor the Protestant site known as "the Garden Tomb" discovered in 1883 by the British officer Charles Gordon. Here in a serene setting outside the present-day walls of Jerusalem can be found a weathered tomb situated next to a deeply eroded limestone hill which Gordon identified as "Skull Hill" (now known as "Gordon's Calvary"). However, archaeological examination of the site by Jerusalem archaeologists Gabriel Barkay and Amos Kloner have shown that the Garden Tomb is part of a system of Iron Age II type tombs in the area all dating from the First Temple period (8th-7th centuries B.C.). The most prominent of these tombs are located next door to the Garden Tomb on the property of the French School of Archaeology, the École Biblique. Since the New Testament says that Jesus was buried in "a new tomb, in which no one had yet been laid" (John 19:41), the Garden Tomb, already some 800 years in the time of Jesus, cannot meet the Gospel's explicit criteria. However, the traditional site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre has a history going back at least to the fourth century A.D. based on its description in Byzantine sources and the existence of columns still in use today from the earlier church of Constantine the Great. Although today it is located within the present walls of the Old City, and the Gospels specify that Jesus was crucified "outside the walls" (John 19:20; Hebrews 13:11-12), the modern walls do not follow the ancient course. This was proven in the late 1960's when British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon discovered that the wall now enclosing the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was a "Second Wall" constructed *after* the time of Jesus (about A.D. 41). Therefore, when Jesus was crucified the site would have been outside the earlier "First Wall." Furthermore, in 1976 Israeli archaeologist Magen Broshi uncovered a portion of the original Herodian wall in the northeast section of the church. This revealed that the area upon which the church is built was just outside the western wall of the city on the line of the First Wall. In addition, other archaeologists have discovered that a "Garden Gate" was on this wall, a fact which agrees with the Gospel's mention of a garden in this area. Examination of the tombs in the vicinity of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre confirm that they are from the late Second Temple period (first century A.D.), the very time in which Jesus would have lived. The type of tomb also matches the precise type of tomb in which Jesus was laid.

Archaeological excavations to expose the rock enclosed by the Church have revealed that it was a rejected portion of a pre-exilic white stone quarry, as evidenced by Iron Age II pottery at the site. In this light, if this is the actual site it has been suggested that Peter's citation of Psalm 118:22: "The stone which the builders rejected ..." may have a double meaning (see Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7). By the first century B.C. this rejected quarry had made the transition from a refuse dump to a burial site. It also gives evidence that it was located near a public road in Jesus' time, another factor which helps to qualify it as the authentic site since the Gospels record that those passing by the place where Jesus' cross was situated were able to mock Him (see Matthew 27:39). The nature of the rock site fits both the Jewish and Roman requirements as an execution site and it may be because of its association with a place of death that it was called in Jesus' time the "place of the skull." A portion of the rock can still be viewed today through a glass-covered section on the entrance level of the Church. This visible remnant of rock bears evidence of earthquake activity, a fact which accords with the Gospel story of an earthquake that accompanied the crucifixion (Matthew 27:51).

With respect to the burial of Jesus, in the first century two types of tombs were in use. One was the more common *kokim* tomb which employed long narrow niches cut into the chamber of the burial cave

walls at right angles. The other known as the *arcosolia* tomb had shallow benches cut parallel to the wall of the chamber with an arch-shaped top over the recess. These type of tombs were reserved for those of wealth and high rank. This seems to be the type of tomb in which Jesus was laid because Jesus tomb was said to be a wealthy man's tomb (Matthew 27:57; cf. Isaiah 53:9), the body could be seen by the disciples as laid out (something only possible with a bench cut tomb), John 20:5, 11, and the angels were seen sitting at both His head and feet (John 20:12). The "Tomb of Jesus" at the traditional site, though deformed by centuries of devoted pilgrims, is clearly composed of an antechamber and a rock-cut *arcosolium*.

Excavations conducted in the late 1970's in the area of the tomb has provided additional support for this being the place where the original Easter drama was performed. In the lower sections of the Church were discovered the foundations of the Roman emperor Hadrian's "Forum," in which his Temple of Aphrodite had been erected around A.D.135. Hadrian followed Roman custom in building pagan temples and shrines to supercede earlier religious structures. This was done at the site of the Jewish Temple, located not far from the Holy Sepulchre Church, and the fourth century church historian and Bishop of Caesarea Eusebius confirms that it was also done in this case: "Hadrian built a huge rectangular platform over this quarry, concealing the holy cave beneath this massive mound." If the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is the actual site venerated by Christians as the tomb of Jesus, it would explain this location for the Roman building.

When the disciples first came to the tomb on that first Easter morning, the Gospels record: "the body of Jesus they did not find." In the same manner down through the ages skeptics and critics have also come, whether literally or figuratively, and the verdict of history has remained the same as in ancient times - "His body they did not find." In the final analysis, archaeology may bring us to the tomb, but only faith - informed by the facts - can bring us to Christ. Yet, because archaeology has shown us that the facts that support faith are accurate - an identifiable tomb attesting to literal events - our faith in the Christ of history *does* depend upon an historically empty tomb for its reality. Archaeology has revealed the persons (Caiaphas, Pilate) and events (crucifixion, entombment) which make up the story of Easter. The resurrection is interwoven with these facts so as to command the same consideration. And when considered along with the historical, social and emotional facts of the first Easter that surround the claim that Christ arose, archaeology adds yet another witness to Him Who has come and is coming again!